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# Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery researchers bring the dead to life

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It was so long ago that Charles T. Moore died, nearly 104 years, you might wonder if there's a soul still breathing who cares a whit about who Moore was or where his earthly remains lie.

In fact, at least two do. Sandy Frary and Ray Owen are wrapping up nine years of tedious, exhausting, gumshoe work to flesh out, if you will, the body of knowledge on who is buried at the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery.

Everyone knows that many of early Santa Rosa's leading residents — Carrillos, McDonalds, Hoens — repose there at the heavily wooded, gently hilly graveyard that rises from Franklin Avenue near Santa Rosa's Town and Country shopping center.

But for decades, little or nothing has been known about a good many other of the more than 5,200 people buried there. Earlier records of the interments that began in 1854 with the death of Thompson Mize, who was besotted when he drowned in a puddle downtown, are laced with mistakes and omissions.

To correct the errors, to determine who is or is not buried at the 17-acre Rural Cemetery and to discover all that is possible about the life stories of decedents long known only by their names — that is what Owen and Frary set out to do.

The pair toiled as volunteers, interviewing descendants and scouring dusty coroners' books, microfilms of old newspapers, the county History and Genealogy Library, and public property, probate and other records.

Their primary payoff is knowing that the book they will produce, a greatly expanded and humanized fourth printing of the "Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery Burial Listings," will be a hugely valuable resource for anyone who has a family member interred at the graveyard or who simply loves local history.

"It's going to be a really nice book," Frary said, adding matter of factly, "Every Santa Rosan should have one."

As archivist to the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee, and as someone who savors a good story, Frary has most delighted at uncovering real-life tales about people who previously were mere names on a graveyard census.

For instance: Research into Charles T. Moore, who disappeared from Santa Rosa early in 1913, led Frary to a Press Democrat story that recounted odd details of the discovery of his body at the mouth of San Francisco Bay.

It clearly had been in the water for some time, so the people who pulled it out were surprised that a hat remained on the head. Though the body was in time positively identified as Moore's, the hat was a fedora. And he'd never been seen in anything but a Stetson.

It makes Frary smile to tell about getting in touch with a great-grandson of Nellie Stella Hawkins, who was buried in the Rural Cemetery in May 1954. No details of her life appear in the previous three editions of the Cemetery Listings, first published in 1987.

But after speaking with the great-grandson, Frary noted after the name of Nellie Hawkins that "she liked to drink, smoke and dance, and she wore bright, red lipstick."

Until the research by Frary and Owen, a retired federal government investigator and student of genealogy, almost nothing was known about a man who was buried in the historic graveyard in 1884, Edward Edmondson.

The revised book, which the pair has nearly completed and is set to be published in 2017, discloses that Edmondson was one of the leading still-life and portrait artists of Dayton, Ohio, from the early 1850s until his family moved to California in 1880.

Then there's George Hall. Frary dug for details of his life and found that he was an attorney who took it upon himself to go to Sacramento with a bill to require that stenographers be present in court to record all that is said. It passed.

Hall died in June 1899 and was buried in the Santa Rosa cemetery.

The near-decade of work by Frary and Owen, which earlier in the year prompted the City Council to present them with Merit Awards, brought the addition of more than 200 names to the roster of those known to be buried at the cemetery.

The pair also deleted from the previous 2007 edition of the Burial Listings the names of more than 40 people wrongly included in the database. Frary and Owen said those people were in fact buried at the county cemetery on Chanate Road, or elsewhere.

The new book also will reflect the correcting of what Frary called "thousands upon thousands" of spelling, factual and other errors. "They murdered the spellings of some names," Frary said of earlier contributors to the graveyard names list.

The research partners have, in addition, updated and added details of life to the listings for the Rural Cemetery's 251 known military veterans, the earliest having served in the War of 1812 and the most recent, in Korea.

New, too, to the book are details of what caused many people to wind up at the Rural Cemetery. Especially through the 19th century, Owen said, Santa Rosans in substantial numbers died from shootings and falls, electrocutions and myriad other accidents.

“They shot themselves, they shot each other,” he said. “They were always drowning while taking a bath. ”

Though the 2017 “Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery Burial Listings” is nearly ready for printing, Owen and Frary continue almost daily to make new discoveries. Within the past week alone, Owen confirmed the names of four people who are buried in the cemetery but whose names didn’t appear in the previous listings.

“This project will never end,” Frary said. Not only do many of the decedents’ stories remain undiscovered and unshared, but the whereabouts of about 1,000 of the cemetery’s unmarked graves remain unknown.

As she wraps up this edition of the Rural Cemetery book and anticipates the next one, Frary is eager to hear from people who have one or more ancestors in the historic graveyard park and who might have stories and details to share.

Such descendants can contact Frary through the city Recreation and Parks Department on Stony Point Road, 543-3279. When the book is published next year, it will be available for sale through that same department.

No longer just names from long ago, Frary said it pleases her that the book restores to many late Santa Rosans “a face, and a story.”